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TAGS: [PREL](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: THE DICHOTOMY OF ISLAM IN TUNISIA

REF: A. TUNIS 2420
[1](#)B. TUNIS 2153

Classified By: AMBASSADOR WILLIAM HUDSON FOR REASONS 1.5 (b) AND (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. Tunisian religious views cut across a wide spectrum of beliefs and adherence. From atheists to Christians to Muslims to Jews, Tunisians are diverse in their religious views. While Islamic extremists may have enjoyed strong popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s, since then the GOT has co-opted the religious movement while labeling those with political leanings as terrorists. Many secular Tunisians, especially those of the Bourguiba generation, also completely reject the possibility of including conservative religious elements in government, as they believe these groups will reverse the social and cultural progress Tunisia has made since independence. At the same time, Tunisians are more visibly religious today than they were even ten years ago. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND
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[1](#)2. (C) Tunisia has a history of moderate and secular religious leanings. Founding father and first President Habib Bourguiba undertook political and social reforms that some called anti-Islamic according to some interpretations of the Quran, such as banning polygamy and granting women inheritance rights. He also famously drank juice on television during the holy month of Ramadan and removed a young woman's veil, saying both could hinder progress and development. Tunisians explain that the Maliki school of Islamic jurisprudence followed by North Africans is more moderate than those schools followed in the Levant and the Gulf, and that Tunisians have rarely been conservative or even observant Muslims. Despite this, like many Muslim countries, Tunisia experienced a resurgence of conservative religious elements in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Second (and current) President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and the an-Nahda (Renaissance) Party engaged in a bitter and sometimes violent struggle for political power. An-Nahda, which enjoyed strong support, particularly among students, was subsequently banned, and Ben Ali has used the Ministry of Interior to ensure religious elements never again gained such popular support.

ISLAM IN TUNISIA TODAY
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[1](#)3. (C) Tunisians and foreigners alike often remark on the increase in outward displays of faith that has occurred in Tunisia over the past ten years. More women appear to be wearing the veil, mosque attendance is rising, and more Tunisians fast during Ramadan. Even public advertising seems to be impacted. Recently, local shops displayed an advertisement for skin cream that depicted a naked female body. A few weeks later, the posters were covered with a piece of draped cloth that hid the female features, and shortly thereafter the ads were taken down altogether.

Poloff spoke to two well-educated, professional thirty year old women about the ad: their responses represent the divergent views of average Tunisians about religion today. One expressed shock that conservative elements could actually impact advertising; the other said she was pleased that someone was taking action to protect religious morals.

GOT RESPONSE =====

14. (C) Since the mid-1990s, the GOT has been waging a war of words with religious elements, characterizing conservative Muslims as "Islamists" and "terrorists". This policy has been quite successful, as the two terms are used practically interchangeably in Tunisia today. The GOT uses the term "Islamist" to tarnish the image of those who it thinks represent a threat to regime stability. FM Abdullah recently told Ambassador (Ref A) that he has noticed a "regression" in Tunisian society toward more conservative religious practices. At a recent meeting with U.S. military officials, the MFA Director General for the Americas and Asia characterized those who use the Quran to justify extremism as "criminals". The GOT also uses a policy of "exporting" nationals who are suspected of fundamentalist behavior to combat the internal Islamic threat, while failing to address the root causes (Ref B).

15. (C) To reach out to moderate Muslims and combat extremism, President Ben Ali has also taken steps to co-opt the popularity of religious sentiments in Tunisia by highlighting his own religious sentiments and practices. In 1992, Ben Ali elevated the then Department of Religious Affairs to a full-fledged Ministry. On Muslim holy days, Ben Ali prays at a large mosque built in greater Tunis in 2003, eclipsing a nearby historical cathedral. In an attempt to further exploit Tunisia's Muslim and Arab heritage, Ben Ali decreed that Arabic is the official language of the GOT. One of his daughters now reportedly wears the hijab, or veil.

SECULARISM STILL STRONG =====

16. (C) A significant portion of the Tunisian populace is strongly secular in their beliefs and agrees with President Ben Ali and the GOT that political Islam represents a threat to Tunisia's economic and social progress. These views are found throughout Tunisia, not only in the relatively modern and Western capital of Tunis. A young shopkeeper in the ancient Roman town of Sbeitla told Poloff that he is Arab, not Muslim. Muslims pray, go to mosque and read the Quran, and are nothing like him. The trend towards increasingly outward expression of one's faith is disturbing to these Tunisians, who tend to doubt the true intentions of those who suddenly become conservative Muslims. One woman told Poloff that shopkeepers complain that women are donning the hijab then coming to the market and stealing produce. A former an-Nahda member also complained to Poloff that politicized Muslim groups are all about political activism and alliances. God and religion are irrelevant to these organizations, which would not be any better than the current political leadership in Tunisia.

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE, NOT EXTREMISM =====

17. (C) At the same time, many Tunisians are increasingly demonstrating their religious beliefs, while calling into question the historically secular nature of Tunisian society. One man, discussing the 2002 floods in Tunisia, told Poloff that natural disasters are the result of "people not thanking God." He went on to explain that Tunisians do not pray or otherwise fulfill their religious commitments, especially those Tunisian women go out of the house "naked." More religious Tunisians often express their feelings that the GOT restricts their ability to worship freely. A young doctoral student told Poloff that she would wear the veil, but she fears that her brothers, who are government employees, could lose their jobs if she insisted. There are many anecdotes

about GOT harassment of veiled women or men with beards, including stories that police have torn off women's veils, manhandled veiled women in the markets and arrested and interrogated bearded men or veiled women. This strong government reaction drives the most religious underground - and even out of the country. Some Tunisians claim to know a story - real or rumored - of a young Tunisian man who traveled to Iraq on "jihad" to fight in the Iraqi resistance.

THE MIDDLE ROAD

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18. (C) Despite the strong views against conservatism, some observant Muslims have found a middle ground that is acceptable to the GOT. Such Tunisians attend mosque and observe other religious practices, while keeping a low profile. One forty-year-old man told Poloff that his wife wears the veil. When asked if she had any difficulties with the GOT, he said, "No, she wears the traditional head scarf, not a conservative veil." Another young woman cited a hadith (saying) from the Prophet Muhammad, that advises (in short) if you cannot speak out against wrongdoing, or express your disagreement, the least you can do is know it is wrong in your heart. The woman said that she does not believe she can wear the veil in Tunisia, but she, and thus God, knows that she would if she could.

19. (C) COMMENT. The GOT's efforts to walk the fine line between respecting Tunisia's Islamic roots and combating religious extremism has had an unclear impact on the public. Clearly, the apparent increase in religious observance is being tolerated to a certain extent by the GOT. But any forays into the political sphere, through government criticism or political activism, are completely restricted. While one could speculate that repressing religious expressions could lead to a religiously-based attempt to overthrow the government, the unique position of Islam in Tunisia suggests that there are many moderate elements that could act as a counter-balance to any sudden move towards extremism. In fact, scholarly works that discuss topics such as moderate Islamic political thought, secular government and interfaith dialogue, are among the most popular books in Tunisia.

HUDSON